



## Danish Focus group protocol for children & adults

*Methodology for kindergarten based focus groups on food and meals and physical activity*

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# Danish Focus group protocol for children & adults Periscope

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**Methodology for kindergarten based focus groups  
on food and meals and physical activity**



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2008

## Introduction

As one aim of the research was to gain knowledge about children's perception on food and meals as well as physical activity, it was decided that a qualitative method would be most appropriate. In addition the use of FG as research method was chosen, as this method gives the researcher the opportunity to explore the children's knowledge and perception of a given subject. Thus recognizes the participants as experts of their world. FG's have the additional advantages of minimize the possibility of the children responding to please the interviewer, and also remove the pressure from the individual child (Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

As in this particularly research it is decided to use the FG method to collect the dietary empiric, it must also be recognised that this method is not common to use with children at the age of 5, and therefore finding literature with best suitable ways to conduct the interviews have unfortunately not been found. Thus, the FG method used in this research is conducted explorative and modified to fit the aims of the research.

The methodology was developed in Kastanien kindergarten in Alleroed Municipality and the aim is to develop a revised methodology based on the findings from the pilot.

This revised methodology was used to collect data for the PERISCOPE project in two kindergartens in Fredensborg and Copenhagen municipality.

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## Children as respondents

Within the last two decades, there has been a change regarding the use of children as respondents in empirical research (Andersen & Kjærulff, 2003). Contrary to how children were looked at previously in relation to empirical research, they are now considered as a important sources to gain information on how children themselves is experiencing the world in which they live in. Hence, they are no longer looked upon as objects in research manners, but as subjects, experts, containing valid and significant knowledge. Moreover, by using and considering children as valid sources, knowledge on perspectives that may not be obvious to adults might be accomplished (Andersen & Kjærulff 2003).

This change within research methods, derives especially from the UN convention of 1989 on the rights of children, in which it is stated: (...) *the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law*” (UN, 1989). Thus, in modern society children have rights.

When dealing with children, a certain pedagogic approach must be considered in order to prepare a research involving children. The psychologist Jean Piaget’s four stages of cognitive development can be a useful guideline in determining which research approach is most fit for a given age group (Woolfork, 2004).

Stage	Approximate Age	Characteristics
Sensorimotor	0-2 years	Begins to make use of imitations, memory and thought.  Begins to recognise that objects do not cease to exist when they are hidden. Moves from reflex action to goal directed activity.
Preoperational stage	2-7 years	Gradually develops use of language and ability to think in symbolic form. Able to think operation through logically in one direction. Has difficulties seeing another person's point of view.
Concrete operational	7-11 years	Able to solve concrete problems in logical fashion. Understands laws of conservation and is able to classify and seriate. Understands reversibility.
Fomal operational	11-Adult	Able to solve abstract problems in logical fashion. Becomes more scientific in thinking. Develops concerns about social issues, identity.

Table 1: Cognitive development (Woolfork 2004)

Some critics have been addressed to Piaget's stages of cognitive development, due to lack of recognition of different kinds of cognitive progress within the same stages. Hence, ideally an individual assessment of each child should be made to assess the cognitive development within different research focuses. However, this approach is time consuming and therefore the stages can be used as a guideline to pick the suitable age group for a given research.

## **Methods**

### ***Development of the Children's Focus Group Guide***

When conducting a FG the development of a guide can be useful to ensure that all important topics are covered during the interview. Initially, one guide was developed for the pilot using the two focuses of interest, i.e. food/meals (FM) and physical activity (PA) to structure the interview. In addition, it consisted of non-leading and open-ended questions, which could generate discussion among the children, starting with general questions followed by more specific ones. However, as children this age may have difficulties in understanding abstract questions due to their cognitive level, it was emphasised that the questions were modified in accordance to this.

Furthermore, it was decided to structure the FM part around three - four activities, as these can help facilitate children's participation in a discussion and dialogue (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). The activities included selecting pictures, dialogue based on a picture and the children's drawings of healthy food, as to get a visual association. All children were asked to participate in the activities.

However, the PA part was more difficult to structure around activities, due to the more abstract nature of the subject. Thus, it was chosen to let the children show us places, which they thought of either being good or bad for play, both indoor and outdoor, respectively. It was intended, that this approach also could ensure a more open-ended nature of questions, as the places were used as point of departure for discussion.

### ***Group Composition***

The literature is inconsistent in whether or not a mixed gender composition is preferred with younger children. This is related to disparities in views on that children's concentration may be distracted from the topic of discussion, solely because of the presence of the opposite gender (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). Despite these views, it was aimed for the groups to consist of two boys and two girls, due to the expected different perspectives between genders.

It was additionally considered if the interviews should include friendship groups or not, as these may facilitate group participation through a familiar environment. However, friendship groups can also enhance peer pressure in the interview (Ibid). The decision on inclusion of friendship groups was dealt with by letting the kindergartens teachers select the children, as it was assumed that they had a qualified idea on which children who would be preferable in a group.

In addition we requested 4 children to ensure a minimum of three “talkers”, moreover, it allows one to miss out (e.g. get sick). Furthermore, after discussion with kindergarten practitioners, children at the age of 5 were preferred over younger children in the kindergarten, due to their cognitive development.

### ***Research design, Food and Meals, Children***

This interview was divided into four phases as illustrated in the table below

<b>Research phase</b>	<b>Question of analyse</b>	<b>Objective of analyse</b>
<b>Phase 1:</b>  Opening question: About how the children eat.	What are their daily routines in the kindergarten?	To gain knowledge about how the children think of and understand the meal- and food situation
<b>Phase 2:</b>  On how children experience and see the ‘good meal’ and the ‘deficient meal’	Which kind of meal do children prefer, and which kind of meal do children not prefer?	To gain knowledge about how the children prefer the meal settings
<b>Phase 3:</b>  About how children relates to food they do not know	How do the children see their possibilities/limitations to eat food they do not know?	To gain knowledge about how the children is experiencing their possibilities/limitations to eat food they do not know
<b>Phase 4:</b>  To unveil the health perception of the children and to unveil what the children associates with	How do the children regard healthy food/ which perception do the children have of health	To gain knowledge about the children’s perception of health/ healthy food

healthy food		
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## ***Practical content of the phases in the dietary interview***

### **Phase 1**

In phase one it is the intention to get an understanding of how children understand the concept 'a meal'. Additionally, it has the purpose to get an idea of what and how the children eat in the kindergarten.

### **Phase 2**

In phase two we hand out laminated pictures to the children. The pictures illustrate different kind of meal situations. In addition, we hand out a picture of children cooking together with adults. The children are asked to pick the picture, which they think fits best with how they like to eat.

Afterwards, the children tell each other what they see on the picture which they have chosen and why they have chosen the given picture. Last the children are asked to elaborate their thoughts about the chosen pictures. The same method is used again, but this time the children has to choose a picture which resemble a meal situation they do not prefer.

### **Phase 3**

In phase 3, we present a picture of a buffet for the children. This is to discover whether or not the children would taste and pick food which they have no knowledge of.

### **Phase 4**

In phase 4, the children draw food which they regard as healthy. Afterwards the children explain to each other what their drawing resembles and why they have chosen to draw this exact drawing.

### ***Research design, PA and Movement, Children***

This interview is divided into three overall phases and two sub-phases, as we wanted the children to look separately on the indoor and outdoor environment. The phases are shown in the table below:

<b>Research phase</b>	<b>Question of analyse</b>	<b>Objective of analyse</b>
<b>Phase 1:</b>  Opening question about the movements of the children	What are their daily routines? How do the children move in their everyday life?	To gain knowledge about how the children thinks of and understand movement
<b>Phase 2a:</b>  Indoor:  When it comes to movement, what do the children prefer?	Which kind of movements do the children prefer?	To gain knowledge about how the children prefer to move
<b>Phase 2b:</b>  Indoor:  When it comes to movement, which settings do the children prefer	How do the children look at their possibilities/limitations to move?	To gain knowledge about how the children is experiencing their possibilities/limitations to move
<b>Phase 3a:</b>  Outdoor:  When it comes to movement, what do the children prefer?	Which kind of movement do the children prefer?	To gain knowledge about how the children prefer to move

<b>Phase 3b:</b>  Outdoor:  When it comes to movement, which settings do the children prefer?	How do the children look at their possibilities/limitations to move?	To gain knowledge about how the children is experiencing their possibilities/limitations to move

### ***Practical content of the phases in the PA/movement interview***

#### **Phase 1**

In phase one it is the intention to get an understanding of how children understand the concept of 'movement'. Additionally, it is the purpose to get an idea of how the children move and use their bodies in the environment in the kindergarten.

#### **Phase 2a+b and 3a+b**

In these phases we ask the children to tell and show us and each other how and where they like to move and use their bodies both indoors and outdoors in the kindergarten. The purpose is to gain knowledge of the perceptions children have of possibilities and limitations of movement in the kindergarten environment.

## **Inclusion of Relevant Stakeholders (parents and pedagogues)**

Parents and pedagogues are important stakeholders in the lives of children. Thus, these stakeholders seem obvious to involve in the present project. Moreover, by involving these stakeholders important perspectives of how children eat and prefer their meals as well as their level of PA might be accomplished. The perspective on what might limit or encourage healthy eating and PA patterns in children, is especially important in current project as the children involved has a limited cognitive development, due to their young age (4 – 5 years), and therefore do not express themselves in a very clear manner. Thus it can be questioned whether or not it is suitable to only included statements of children, if a broad perspective is sought, hence the involvement of the mentioned stakeholders.

## ***Conduction of the Focus Group Interviews***

The interviews were conducted in consistency with the methodological framework developed by Margherita Caroli and followed the guidelines outlined in the PERISCOPE protocol. However, it was found that recruitment of participants were rather difficult, due to a) time restrains, as the participant is relatively occupied in their spare time, and b) lack of resources in the kindergartens. Hence, the number of participants was reduced, in order to conduct the interviews within deadline.

Two separate interviews with parents and kindergarten teachers, respectively, were carried out, regarding what they saw as limitations and possibilities for the children to develop healthy eating habits and improve their movement and PA. After serious consideration, it was decided not to include parents and kindergarten teachers in the same interview, due to assumed conflicts of interest. However, the interview guide used in both interviews was identical. As to open the FG interview, the stakeholders were asked to discuss what they understood by the term ‘health habits’, to ensure an association regarding the specific topic. The following stage of the interview was divided into two main phases, one regarding the dietary and one with the physical activity angle, respectively. The two main phases were furthermore divided into two sub phases, one on the subject of limitations (a) and one on possibility (b) to develop healthy eating habits as well as improve patterns of PA.

## **Videotaping**

In present research, it is chosen to use videotaping as a method, both for conducting the observation and the FG interviews. In relation to the use of videotaping as observation, it has the advantages that when reviewing the videotape, it is possible to interpret on actions not visible and not captured by the eye and memory. Thus it has the ability to get closer to reality than traditional methods (ibid). However, when a researcher enters ‘the field’, it must be recognized that the researcher will influences it and hereby spoils the natural environment (Kristiansen & Krogstrup, 1999).

Furthermore, the advantages by videotaping is even greater by using the method for FG interviews with children, as interviewing young children often can have unforeseeably outcomes and hence it can be difficult to stick strictly to the interview guide. Additionally, in present research in the FG regarding children and dietary, the children are asked to participate actively, firstly by picking

drawings and secondly to draw a drawing themselves. By videotaping, it gives the interpreter the chance to interpret on e.g. facial expressions, what they were actually drawing and to distinguish between the children, as they tend to interrupt each other. Thus, by using videotaping it gives the interpreter the possibility to include these factors in the analysis.

## **Ethical Issues**

There are several ethical aspects, which need to be taken into consideration when conducting a FG interview, especially regarding the children. Most important is the informed consent from the parents, as children themselves are unable to legally consent. Thus the introductory letter provided the parents with a form to consent. However, even though parental consent has been given, the child's assent is also needed. The briefing given in the beginning in each FG interview ensured this. It was emphasised that the children knew they were allowed to leave the interview at any time without it having any consequences, and that they were not obligated to answer the questions.

Furthermore, it is important to explain that participation in the interview is confidential as well as the answers they give. The same briefing was given to the stakeholders in the respective interviews, as these as well needs to be informed about their "rights" in this particular situation. When parental consent and the child's assent have been given, the moderator needs to consider the subjects of disclosure and stressful behaviour of the participants, as this can put participants at risk if it is not cared for. In present research the topic in question has in general a non-sensitive and non-controversial nature, which would not lead to stress and over-disclosure in a way that could harm the participants. However, a topic may always occur sensitive and controversial to some people, and thus this was kept in mind of the moderator during the interviews.

## **Pilot test**

The research was piloted at a kindergarten in Alleroed Municipality under the supervision of kindergarten manager M.Arts Laila Dall Mikkelsen during September/October 2008 as a part of this municipality's "Healthy Kindergarten" project. The research was then carried out post pilot scale in two kindergartens in Fredensborg and Copenhagen municipality.

Before conducting the pilot test, the guide was reviewed by Laila Dall Mikkelsen, who suggested few adjustments of the questions. Additionally, it was also recommended to separate the interview into two, in order to keep the interview relatively short, app. 30 – 45 min, as children this age easily tend to lose their focus and concentration (Borgers et. al, 2000).

## ***Methodological Reflections Post Pilot test***

The FG interview with children and PA/movement did not meet our expectations. It was found that the PA and movement subject seemed to be too abstract for children this age to talk about. In the conducted pilot, the children quickly lost their focus and concentration and despite the change of setting and a small break, the children were not able to concentrate and resume to the interview.

Based on this finding, it has been decided to use an alternative methodology. This methodology will use researcher observations of the children in their natural settings in the kindergarten (both inside and outside) and will be supported by digital video camera recorded observation. By using this method it is the intention to capture the movement of the children, in a context of their natural environment in the kindergarten.

Due to time limitations it was not possible to conduct an observation at the pilot kindergarten. However, it is recognized by the researchers that this is not the optimal approach, as a method always should be piloted before conducted full-scale.

Both the pilot and the full-scale adults' focus group interviews were conducted using the same method, as it was found that nothing needed to be changed from the conducted pilot, thus this section does not distinguish between the two.

## **Sampling**

The kindergartens were selected from the sampling group that was chosen in Periscopes Danish task force prior to this research. The inclusion criterion for this study was the possession of a devoted and enthusiastic attitude towards this project from the kindergartens, as it requires large stakeholder participation (i.e. from parents, kindergarten teachers and children).

In order to recruit stakeholders, a number of invitation letters were sent out to inform the kindergarten and stakeholders about the project and dates for the interviews. The leaders of the kindergartens were asked to choose 2x4 children, which would be able to participate in the focus group interviews, about food and meals and physical activity (PA), respectively.

By letting the kindergarten leaders choose the children, it is assumed that shy and "not likely to talk" children were not included in the interviews. Using this method, it is recognized that the results may be biased, as the result may have been different if the children had been chosen randomly. However, due to time limitations it has not been possible to choose the children randomly.

For each group it was aimed at that the groups consisted of two boys and two girls, due to the expected different perspectives between genders. In addition we asked for 4 children allowing one to miss out (e.g. get sick). Furthermore, after discussion with kindergarten practitioners, children at the age of 5 were preferred over younger children in the kindergarten, due to their cognitive development.

The FG interviews with the children were held in the kindergarten. Danish children spend at least half of their awoken time in the kindergarten making this area a well known and familiar setting and since the focus of the study is kindergarten related this setting was chosen for domestic environment. It is expected that using the kindergarten as location makes it easier to reach the children, instead of home-visits, which needs planning with their parents. In the kindergarten, the children were invited to a separate room, in order for them not to be distracted by their peers.

They were seated around a table, since the method included presenting them different pictures, as well as asking them to make drawings. Moreover, it was assumed to be important that all children were able to see the other children.

The interviews were recorded using both digital audio and video taping. The video tape allows researchers to keep an objective record of non verbal language of the entire group, as this way of communicating is common among children this age.